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Alienation in America: The Immigrant Catholic and Public Education in Pre-Civil War America

Vincent P. Lannie

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IT has become commonplace in the 1960's to talk about the alienated American, the disinherited American, the culturally different American. Most people talk in general terms but they almost always mean the Negro American. For the Negro is an alienated American of the largest minority group in the United States. In its historical quest for a unified society, the nation has called upon the public schools to live up to their traditional socializing responsibilities. At the present time, however, the focus is not upon the European immigrant coming from foreign shores but rather upon the segregated black man living in the most alienated ghettos of America. Martin Luther King spoke about educating the minds and hearts of white Americans in a concerted attempt to usher in the true kingdom of an integrated and just society. And what better place to begin this process than in the schools! Yet many Negroes have begun to lose faith in the schools as they have come to view them as an unreconstructed part of a basically racist society. A few are calling for the total rejection of the white man's society including his inflexible school structure. Others are demanding community — and this often means black — control of the schools in order to make them more responsive to the total needs of their youngsters. They want schools that will nurture the self-identity of the Negro child, deepen his pride in his color and heritage, and develop his capabilities to help create a truly democratic society which is "worthy, lovely, and harmonious."¹ That grand old lady of the social settlement movement in America, Jane Addams, once stated these desires in another way — indeed quite a contemporary way — when she concluded "that unless all men and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having."²

¹ For a good analysis of the relationship of the Negro and American education, see Henry J. Perkinson, *The Imperfect Panacea: American Faith in Education, 1865-1965* (New York, 1968), pp. 13-61.

² Quoted in Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School* (New York, 1964), p. 63.

In mid-nineteenth century America, immigrants from across the Atlantic — especially Irish and, to a lesser degree, German Roman Catholics — challenged public education with a like responsibility. The three decades prior to the Civil War witnessed the trek of the downtrodden of Europe to the new world in hope of a better way of life. It was during these years that the slowly developing public schools were called upon to play a decisive role in socializing the children of these “alien hordes” into the existing republican and Christian modes of American life. But since it reflected the pervasive Protestantism of American culture, public education remained basically insensitive and unresponsive to Catholic religious sensibilities in its attempt to “Americanize” these immigrant youngsters. Inflexibility on the part of most school authorities and of society in general resulted in social dislocation, religious and ethnic turmoil, and the eventual establishment of a separate system of Catholic education in the United States. This first major withdrawal of community support for public education is the subject of my analysis.

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Many Americans of the pre-Civil War period feared a “barbarian invasion” of their country as nearly four million immigrants, *The Uprooted* as Oscar Handlin calls them, flocked to this new land of “milk and honey.” American Protestants in particular reacted rather negatively to the ethnic and religious background of these Irish and German Catholic newcomers. One commentator characterized them as “the very scum and dregs of human nature,” while another feared that the continued emigration of the Irish to American shores would transform this country from a haven for all into “the common sewer of Ireland.”³ Others worried that the foreigners’ ignorance of American institutions and unacquaintance “with the modes of thought and habits of life peculiar to a free people” would make it especially difficult for them to adapt to the republican heritage of their adopted country.⁴ Even the dispossessed Negro expressed concern at this apparent immigrant inundation of his homeland. Native Americans should “wake up to the importance and thoroughness of . . . [the] German invasion,” wrote James McCune Smith, a Negro physician and New York politician, in 1859, lest “some 4th day of March, a man shall uncover his head on the Capitol steps and deliver an Inaugural in good *High*

Dutch . . . and merchant marts on Broadway, shall hang out signs declaring 'English spoken here.' " Negroes were rather caustic over the proscription of their vote while the same right was "granted to European paupers, blacklegs and burglars!!!"⁵ There were occasional voices which rejected this negative reaction to the immigrant as hyphenated patriotism resulting from a rather shortsighted understanding of America's past. Thus, Governor William Seward of New York, in the early 1840's, defended immigrants — especially the Irish — on the grounds that the United States was a nation of immigrants and that these newcomers were as devoted to their adopted country as were native citizens. "Why should an American hate foreigners?" asked Seward. "It is to hate such as his forefathers were. Why should a foreigner be taught to hate Americans? It is to hate what he is most anxious his children should become."⁶ But sentiments such as these were usually submerged beneath the general disdain toward the immigrant.

But there was more. Native hostility to the immigrant embraced not only his ethnicity but also his religious allegiance. As a result, distrust of the Irish as foreigners and as Catholics ran particularly deep. Irishmen were rowdies, ne'er-do-wells, impulsive, quarrelsome, drunken, and threadbare. More importantly, perhaps, they were pillars of an alien and hated church and attracted a good deal of anti-Catholic sentiment that was in the air. In 1835, Samuel F. B. Morse alerted his native countrymen "that there is good reason for believing that the despots of Europe are attempting by the spread of Popery in this country, to subvert its free institutions. . . ." Even at this early date, Morse predicted that the "question of Popery and Protestantism, or Absolutism and Republicanism is fast becoming and will shortly be the GREAT

³ Allan Nevins and Milton H. Thomas (eds.), *The Diary of George Templeton Strong, 1835-1875* (New York, 1952), I, 94; Lawrence Kehoe (ed.), *Complete Works of the Most Rev. John Hughes, D.D.* (New York, 1865), I, 52-53, 66, 144-145.

⁴ This idea that immigrants lacked the requisite background and experience to participate fully in a republican society was a common theme voiced during the decades before the Civil War.

⁵ Quoted in Gilbert Osofsky, "The Enduring Ghetto," *Journal of American History*, LV (September, 1968), 251.

⁶ William Seward to Harman C. Westervelt, Albany, New York, March 25, 1840, Seward Papers, University of Rochester. For a negative Whig reaction to Seward's views "respecting our Irish 'fellow citizens,'" see Harman C. Westervelt to William Seward, New York, March 19, April 18, 1840, *ibid.*

ABSORBING QUESTION, not only of this country but of the whole civilized world."⁷

Such apprehensions were frightfully imminent to thousands of Protestants and particularly to militant anti-Catholics. As increasing numbers of Catholic immigrants settled in America, the possibility of a Popish take-over began to look more and more plausible. Whole sections of major cities were becoming overwhelmingly Catholic and churches appeared to be springing up everywhere. This rapid growth of institutional Catholicism evoked much heated discussion in the press and pulpit. Tracts, magazines, newspapers, and sermons all warned about the Roman Church's subversion of American institutions and pollution of enlightened Christianity. By no means a fanatically anti-Catholic organization, the American and Foreign Christian Union, established "to pour the light of the Gospel upon the minds under the domination of Popery," printed an article in 1850 which accentuated this growing Protestant apprehension. Twenty years before in 1830, argued the author, no Protestant would have dreamed that in just two decades America, a citadel of unadulterated Christianity, would harbor 29 bishops, 30 dioceses, 1,081 priests, 1,073 churches, 17 colleges, 29 ecclesiastical seminaries, and 91 female academies in addition to numerous orphan schools and asylums.⁸ Yet such was the picture in 1850 and, as such, it threatened to alter traditional patterns of American life.

The volume and intensity of this opposition to Catholicism (and thus to its predominantly immigrant adherents) poured forth at an unparalleled rate. Exposé literature flooded the market for an eager audience; "Native American Associations" were established to stiffen naturalization laws and to restrict immigration; a convent was burned in Massachusetts and a priest tarred and feathered in Maine; journals fulminated their choicest epithets and ministers thundered their anathemas against "the firm foothold of Popery in America"; and ghastly riots occurred between Catholics and Protestants in Boston, New York and Philadelphia. No wonder that Bishop Francis Kenrick of Philadelphia could record in his diary

⁷ Samuel F. B. Morse, *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States* (New York, 1835), p. 51 and Edward L. Morse (ed.), *Samuel F. B. Morse, His Letters and Journals* (Boston, 1914), II, 36.

⁸ *American and Foreign Christian Union*, I (July, 1850), 318-319.

the frustration and danger of being a Catholic during these dark decades of active hostility against his church.

But if Kenrick could feel weighted down by a suffusive Protestant culture, his more militant and more abrasive episcopal colleague in New York, John Hughes, more often than not took the offensive in a constant struggle against this environment. This new breed of clergymen — the intellectual and spiritual leaders of their flocks as well as immigrants themselves — failed to grasp the psychological dimensions of the Protestant tenor of American society and its deep suspicion of Catholicism. Abhorrence and distrust of Romanism had come to the new world from old world conflict and had developed into an essential part of the colonial mind and later national temper. Moreover, within the historical context of religious liabilities in Ireland, these Catholic ecclesiastics almost expected a certain amount of Protestant harassment. They looked about and all they saw was Protestant "heresy" as the deadly enemy of their traditional faith. They perceived themselves at war with a heretical majority and viewed American Catholicism in a state of siege against a powerful and determined enemy. Because of this fundamental suspicion of an unsympathetic and often hostile majority, many Catholic churchmen unfortunately, though perhaps understandably, adopted a defensive mentality and never seriously attempted to integrate their predominantly immigrant flocks into the mainstream of American life. For in a non-ecumenical age, Protestants were the religious enemy and they who possessed the "truth" were not about to capitulate to their sworn foe.

iii

No area of disagreement between Protestants and Catholics caused more friction than the place of religion in the public schools. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, American education was in ferment and its progress centered upon the emerging common or public school. Common-school education professed to be Christian but not sectarian. The fundamental and commonly accepted elements of Christianity unequivocally belonged in the curriculum whereas controversial theological doctrines had no legitimate place within the school. Precisely because this was a Christian and republican people, Samuel Lewis, Superintendent of the Ohio public schools, believed that the schools should "inculcate sound principles of Christian morality" which did not impinge

upon sectarian differences.⁹ It was the responsibility of the home and the church to engraft their own sectarian tenets upon the school's common core foundation. "As educators, as friends and sustainers of the Common School system," declared Horace Mann on one occasion, "our great duty is . . . to give to all so much religious instruction as is compatible with the rights of others and with the genius of our government — leaving to parents and guardians the direction, during their school days, of all special and peculiar instruction respecting . . . theology. . . ."¹⁰ The medium through which American youngsters were instructed in this nondenominational Christianity was the Bible read "without note or comment." No committed Christian, regardless of his denominational preference, questioned its salutary influence, reverent heritage, and literary excellence. The Scriptures — invariably the Protestant King James Version — embodied the precepts necessary to transform an impressionable and pliable child into a morally mature and Christian adult. Peculiar sectarian creeds merely clouded the simplicity and vitality of the Christian message and consequently had no place in the common school.

Although many Protestants supplemented this general religious instruction with Sunday school classes, Catholics rejected the nondenominational compromise as a viable religious alternative to the teaching of sectarian doctrines in the public schools. In sharp language, they denounced this formula as essentially a Protestant basis for public-school education and attempted to document their contention. These schools adopted "as a regulation the reading of the Protestant Bible and the reciting of Protestant hymns and sometimes of Protestant prayers." In addition, anti-Catholic school-books and bigoted teachers exposed Catholic children to "insidious, if not open attacks on their religious principles and practices" so that they became "*ashamed of their faith*."¹¹ Dissatisfaction with the religious atmosphere and practices of the public schools coupled with the ethnic slurs suffered by many Irish and German children

⁹ Samuel Lewis, *First Annual Report of the Superintendent of Common Schools* (Columbus, 1838), p. 7.

¹⁰ Mary Peabody Mann and George C. Mann, *Life and Works of Horace Mann* (Boston, 1891), II, 289-290. Cf. Neil G. McCluskey, *Public Schools and Moral Education* (New York, 1958), p. 266.

¹¹ "Proceedings of the First Plenary Council of Baltimore (1852)," quoted in Bernard Julius Meiring, "Educational Aspects of the Legislation of the Councils of Baltimore, 1829-1884" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Berkeley, University of California, 1963), pp. 141-142.

caused many Catholic churchmen to characterize public education as antithetical to the preservation of their religious faith. Some even counseled their flocks to keep their children away from such dangerous schools.

High on the list of Catholic objections to public education was the use of the Protestant Bible by Catholic schoolchildren. Catholics condemned public-school Bible reading because versions were used which were not officially authorized by their church and because they were read without any annotative commentary. Precisely because Catholics believed that Christ charged their church to guard and interpret the Christian faith, they could not use any version of the Bible which had not been previously approved by competent ecclesiastical authority. Obviously the King James Version did not enjoy Catholic sanction.

In New York City, a priest argued that public-school Bible reading with no interpretive commentary by the teacher magnified the wide gulf that existed between Catholicism and the Protestant denominations. "The Catholic Church tells her children that they must be taught their religion by AUTHORITY — the [Protestant] Sects say, read the Bible, judge for yourselves. The Bible is read in the public schools, the children are allowed to judge for themselves. The Protestant principle is therefore acted upon, slyly inculcated, and the Schools are Sectarian."¹² Another New York priest criticized a schoolbook which taught scriptural lessons "without note or comment" because such a volume subtly advised Catholic children to follow this dictum: "Your Church is wrong in giving the Bible always with notes; disregard her, and read the Scriptures without any note or comment, and find out a religion for yourselves."¹³ In Boston, Bishop John Fitzpatrick informed the School Committee that Catholics could never accept the "English Protestant translation of the Bible" under any circumstances. They could not do so in conscience and still remain loyal to their church. And yet, reasoned the Bishop, his coreligionists were being subjected to this very pressure. "The law, as administered, holds forth the Protestant version to the Catholic child, and says, 'receive this as

¹² *New York Freeman's Journal*, July 11, 1840. Cf. *ibid.*, October 24, 1840.

¹³ *Minutes of the Free (Public) School Society of the City of New York, 1805-1853*, Board of Trustees, March 24, 1840. This quotation is found in a letter marked "A" in the Appendix of the Society's report of September 25, 1840.

the Bible.' The Catholic child answers, 'I cannot so receive it.'"¹⁴ Fitzpatrick was quite satisfied that the child should answer in this manner. It showed an adherence to his conscience and a commendable loyalty to his religious faith. Bishop Kenrick pursued the same rationale in Philadelphia and asked the city school authorities to respect Catholic "conscientious scruples." "Is it just to place the Protestant Bible in the hands of Catholic children," chided Kenrick, "to make them commit its text to memory, and to respond to the questions which sectarian teachers may put as to its contents?"¹⁵ Not only individual churchmen but collective meetings of bishops viewed "with serious alarm efforts made to poison the fountains of public education, by giving it a sectarian hue, and accustoming children to the use of a version of the Bible made under sectarian bias"¹⁶

But Catholics made it clear that they did not oppose the presence of the Bible in the public schools nor the use of the King James Version for Protestant children. They simply wanted Catholic children excused from reading or studying a biblical version not authorized by their church. Even when the Catholic Douay Bible was not allowed in the public schools (it always contained "notes and comments"), some bishops did not argue the point as long as their children did not have to participate in Protestant Bible reading. They felt that this request was a matter of fair play and involved no special concessions to Catholics. Would not Protestants likewise object to the use of the Catholic version for Protestant children? Of course they would and with good reason. And yet when Catholics voiced dissatisfaction in this matter, they were immediately branded as enemies of the Bible. "But to object to their [Protestant] version," contended Bishop Hughes, was "not to object to the Holy Scriptures."¹⁷

Catholics never succeeded in getting this point across to their Protestant countrymen. Perhaps they never could in a milieu that was so blatantly anti-Catholic in its spirit. This was a Protestant nation after all and the public schools reflected its Protestant heritage. The Bible was a sacred part of the American religious

¹⁴ Quoted in Robert H. Lord, John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, *History of the Archdiocese of Boston* (New York, 1944), II, 597.

¹⁵ *Catholic Herald* (Philadelphia), April 5, 12, 1838.

¹⁶ Pastoral Letter of the Fifth Provincial Council of Baltimore (1843), quoted in Meiring, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹⁷ Kehoe, *op. cit.*, I, 134, 138.

and political tradition while its absence was thought to denote spiritual darkness and political despotism. As a result, Catholic complaints about the King James Bible were usually interpreted to mean opposition to the word of God and the total exclusion of the Scriptures from the public schools. A lawyer in New York rued the day that ecclesiastical representatives of a foreign potentate should dare dictate to Americans whether or not the Bible should be read in their public schools. Some ministers used their pulpits to warn their congregations to be on guard against the "aggressions of the great Papal Hierarchy." In a lecture on "The Bible in Our Public Schools," the Reverend Walter Colton, a Congregational minister, denied the sectarian nature of the King James Version since all Protestants agreed upon it and argued that the thrust of Catholic complaints was against the use "of the Bible altogether."¹⁸ Some of the press reasoned that the King James Bible belonged in the public schools since they were essentially Protestant schools — "planned by Protestants, founded by Protestants, directed by Protestants, and almost wholly supported by Protestants . . ."¹⁹ Moreover, Catholic attempts to remove the Bible from public education were interpreted as part of a battle against American Protestantism and "a blow at the republican institutions and liberties of our country." Protestants were warned that the public schools would degenerate into Papist schools if the Bible were ever "branded and condemned" as a sectarian book.

On occasion some Protestants harbored fears that transcended their hostility to Catholics and the Douay Bible. They felt that if Catholics persisted in their demands to include the Douay Bible in the schools, confusion and disorder would quickly attend Bible reading exercises. And it was "clear that before this will be done, the Bible will be excluded altogether." Not that Catholics would be unhappy since "it is manifest that their whole aim is to exclude the Bible altogether." If Catholics had their way, no Bible reading or religious exercises would be permitted in the schools. If such a situation ever materialized, all semblance of religion would be eliminated from the schools and they would in fact become

¹⁸ Colton's sixteen-page lecture was reprinted in *The Quarterly Review of the American Protestant Association*, I (January, 1844), 10-22. Cf. *Philadelphia Gazette*, December 23, 1843, January 5, 1844.

¹⁹ *North American* (Philadelphia), January 14, 1843. Cf. *Presbyterian*, January 21, 1843.

secularistic or, in the language of the day, "infidel institutions."²⁰ Such an eventuality was anathema to the majority who viewed Bible reading as the distinct Protestant mark on public education. Thus, not only fear of Catholic hostility to the Bible and American institutions but also the dismay that public education would lose its indigenous religious character caused many Protestants to stand firm in their opposition to Catholic demands.

And firm they stood! Bloody riots broke out in Philadelphia in 1844 over Catholic demands that their children be excused from reading the King James Bible.²¹ Catholic teachers were threatened with dismissal if they hesitated to "read the Protestant Bible to their pupils" and some were actually fired. Some Catholic children were whipped before the class for refusing to read the King James Bible; others were kept after school as punishment; in still other cases teachers humiliated Catholic pupils in front of their fellow students because of their religious faith and ethnic background. The most infamous of these "whipping" incidents occurred in Boston in 1859 when a Catholic child, obediently following the wishes of his father and parish priest, was unmercifully beaten for refusing "to join the religious exercise of repeating the Protestant version of the Ten Commandments as found in the King James Bible. The boy's parents brought suit against the teacher charging that he had maliciously assaulted their child. In its decision, the Court ruled that no injustice had been done to the child because as soon as he complied with the law — requiring the recitation of the Decalogue as found in the common English version of the Bible — the punishment had ceased.²² Both attorneys cited the *Donahoe v. Richards* decision of the Maine Supreme Court (1854) which upheld the use of the King James Bible in the public schools of the state by all children. Any other decision, argued the Court, would undermine the power of the state and subject the will of the majority to the conscience of the minority.²³ This decision made it possible for school authorities to force Catholic children to read the King James Bible, and it remained the leading case on the

²⁰ *Presbyterian*, March 9, 16, 1844.

²¹ For an analysis of these riots, see Vincent P. Lannie and Bernard C. Diethorn, "For the Honor and Glory of God: The Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1844," *History of Education Quarterly*, VIII (Spring, 1968), 44-106.

²² For an analysis of this Boston "whipping" case, see Lord, Sexton, and Harrington, *op. cit.*, II, 585-601.

²³ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York, 1938), pp. 293-294, 315 (fn. 19).

subject for many years despite Catholic objections. Catholic students were thus expelled from schools in Boston, New York and other places for refusing to read the Protestant Bible.

Try as they did, Catholics were never able to convince the Protestant majority of the legitimacy of their objections and repeatedly met with resistance in their condemnation of the religious nature of public education. No wonder so many clergymen concluded that the real purpose of the public schools was to undermine and destroy the Catholicity of the younger members of their flocks. And living in a generally unsympathetic environment, they did not think this conclusion to be an overreaction to an acute problem facing the Catholics of that era.

Second only to dissatisfaction with Bible reading in the public schools, Catholics condemned schoolbooks which were either patently anti-Catholic or subtly Protestant-oriented. Although anti-Catholic books could never be justified under any circumstances, volumes that were "Protestant in sympathy" are more understandable for this period. American education had a long Protestant heritage. Since the population had always been predominantly Protestant, the schools quite naturally mirrored this tradition. School children read the Protestant Bible, offered Protestant prayers, and sang Protestant hymns. Why should not schoolbooks mirror this Protestant past? And they did. Reading selections were culled almost exclusively from American and European Protestant authors; Christianity was always identified with Protestantism whereas Catholicism was viewed as a false religion and dangerous to republican government; Protestants usually emerged as righteous heroes while Catholics were painted as inquisitorial villains. It is not surprising that the Protestant milieu facilitated and supported such an undesirable, though understandable, state of affairs.

Bishop Hughes in New York was particularly adamant in his crusade against "sectarian" and historically slanted schoolbooks. In his indictment, Hughes judged a series of reading selections as repugnant to Catholic sensitivity. In a "Dialogue Between Fernando Cortez and William Penn," the Protestant Penn challenged the Catholic Cortez whether a Papist could ever talk about the relationship between reason and religion in the light of the incredible cruelties of the medieval inquisition.²⁴ Other selections portrayed John Huss, the fifteenth-century Bohemian reformer, as being

²⁴ *New York Reader*, No. 3 (New York, 1819-1840), 201-205.

burned at the stake by trusting himself to the "deceitful Catholics" and panegyricized Martin Luther as the man who did more for the cause of "learning, of religion, and of civil liberty" than any other man since the first Christian apostles.²⁵ Additional lessons presented glowing portrayals of Luther as a providential leader who was called by God to arouse the hearts of men sunk in the mire of religious ignorance and superstition.²⁶ Not only did Hughes challenge the historical accuracy of these accounts but he also believed that they would have a deleterious effect on the simple faith of Catholic children. "They will be subject to the ridicule of their companions, and the consequence will be that their domestic and religious attachments will become weakened, they [will] become ashamed of their religion and they will grow up Nothings." ²⁷

Hughes was not alone in his quarrels with public-school authorities over the question of unacceptable schoolbooks. Kenrick challenged the right of books which misrepresented the Catholic religion to be used in the Philadelphia public schools. "It is but just to expect that the books used in the schools shall contain no offensive matter, and that books decidedly hostile to our faith shall not under any pretext be placed in the hands of Catholic children."²⁸ In *An Address to the Impartial Public* . . . , Martin Spalding, Bishop of Louisville, and later Archbishop of Baltimore, condemned public education for, among other things, the presence of "sectarian books" which undermined the religious faith of Catholic youngsters.²⁹ And, of course, when the bishops periodically met as a group, this question usually came up for sharp comment. In 1840, the collective hierarchy denounced the presence of objectionable text and library books which openly and at times insidiously "misrepresent our principles . . . , distort our tenets . . . , vilify our practices and . . . bring contempt upon our Church and

²⁵ Samuel Putnam, *Sequel to the Analytical Reader* (New York, 1824), pp. 266, 296.

²⁶ Lindley Murray, *Sequel to the English Reader* (New York, 1845), pp. 63-65.

²⁷ Kehoe, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 52-53, 145. For an analysis of the schoolbook issue in New York City, see Vincent P. Lannie, *Public Money and Parochial Education* (Cleveland, 1968), pp. 103-118.

²⁸ Francis Kenrick, *Letter Ledger*, pp. 202-204, Philadelphia Archdiocesan Archives. This *Ledger* is a kind of diary of 267 pages and embraces the entire period of Kenrick's episcopacy in Philadelphia.

²⁹ Quoted in Meiring, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

its members.”³⁰ A quarter of a century later, in 1866, they kept up this attack and offered as one reason for their opposition to public education the “daily reading and meditating on authors who attack, slander and sprinkle with foul wit our most sacred religion and teachings, yea even the Saints themselves, [which] gradually weakens in the minds of Catholic children the force and virtue of true religion.”³¹

The Protestant version of the Bible “without note or comment,” anti-Catholic or distorted schoolbooks, Protestant prayers and hymns, vulgar insinuations by some teachers against the ethnicity and religious faith of Catholic children — all of these charges reiterated a consistent theme of Catholic dissatisfaction with the religious atmosphere and practices of public education during the several decades preceding the Civil War.

iv

Although the Protestant permeation of public education continued to elicit caustic attacks from Catholics, the 1850's and 1860's witnessed a decided shift of emphasis concerning Catholic discontent with the public schools. Individual bishops as well as hierarchical councils increasingly began to attack the absence of religion in the schools. Hughes took the lead in emphasizing “Godless education” in secularistic public schools as his new theme. He characterized the public school as a “dragon . . . devouring the hope of the country as well as religion.” Scarcely able to control his contempt (and thus his fear), Hughes denounced public education as equivalent to “Socialism, Red Republicanism, Universalism, Infidelity, Deism, Atheism, and Pantheism — anything, everything, except religionism and patriotism.”³²

Although this choice of epithets was unique to the New York Bishop, he was not alone in pursuing this line of attack. James Roosevelt Bayley, Bishop of Newark and future Archbishop of Baltimore, deplored the exclusion of “all religious instruction” in public education and regarded it as “most fatal to the morals and

³⁰ Peter Guilday (ed.), *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy* (1792-1919) (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1954), pp. 131-132, 134.

³¹ “Proceedings of the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore (1866),” quoted in Meiring, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

³² John Hughes to Anthony Blanc, New York, January 3, 1852, New York Archdiocesan Archives.

religious principles of our children”³³ As Archbishop of Baltimore, Kenrick penned a document which argued that the separation of religion from education tended to “indifference and infidelity” and would lead to “a generation of unbelievers.”³⁴ In an episcopal meeting in 1852, a committee report not only attacked the Protestant practices prevalent in the public schools but censured their exclusion of religion and their tendency to religious indifference. This episcopal committee was convinced that the “radical disease of the public School System throughout this Country is the exclusion of all religion therefrom, in other words its Godlessness.” Since the constitutions of nearly every state in the Union precluded “an establishment of religion” or the teaching of religion, the report reasoned that “Public schools or schools established & controlled entirely by the Civil authorities are therefore essentially *infidel* & even *atheistical*” since “to teach the existence of God and the duty of worshipping him, is to teach religion, which the State is in theory debarred from doing.” In addition, this committee alerted Catholics to the “dangers of evil communication” in the public schools of Catholics with the children of “Protestants, Jews, & infidels. What horrible vices are thus propagated & how rapidly & fearfully they are spreading, the present moral condition of the youth of our cities & larger towns, but too clearly indicates.”³⁵

In opposition to public school integrationist philosophy, the bishops pursued a social and religious ghettoism as they increasingly feared the moral and religious contamination of Catholic children. A year after the Civil War, the bishops convened again and once more repeated their contention that the religious indifferentism of public education was weakening “in the minds of Catholic children the force and virtue of true Religion.” Close association with non-Catholic children in public schools which permitted a “lawless freedom of speaking and acting,” concluded the bishops in mournful tones, quickly consumed “all shame and sense of piety” in Catholic

³³ John Francis Maguire, *The Irish in America* (New York, 1887), p. 435.

³⁴ “Religion the Basis of All Sound Education.” The manuscript of this document is in the Kenrick Papers in the Archdiocesan Archives of Baltimore. It is not dated, though on one page is a notation by Bishop Martin Spaulding that the paper was presented for printing.

³⁵ “Proceedings of the First Plenary Council of Baltimore (1852),” quoted in Meiring, *op. cit.*, pp. 140, 142.

children "even though excellently trained at home."³⁶

This Catholic change in approach which emphasized Godless and religiously indifferent public education rather than its Protestant orientation brought into clearer focus, in the minds of many Catholics, the need for a "separate system" of Catholic education. The reasons for this shift of emphasis are still not completely clear and the whole question needs deeper and more critical investigation. The Protestant Bible and other religious practices may have been present in the public schools. But the bishops felt that these schools, regardless of the presence of these religious forms, simply were not integrating religious doctrine, moral development and secular instruction into the total development of the child's spirit, personality and mind. It is also true that an increasing number of school districts had begun to eliminate Bible reading and other devotional exercises from their classrooms in order to neutralize Protestant-Catholic educational tensions. In a speech before the National Educational Association, the Reverend A. D. Mayo declared that from 1860 to 1880 there swept across the country a wave of reaction against all religious and moral instruction and worship in the public schools. He felt that this trend emerged not as a result of the wish of the majority of Americans but rather as a reaction to continued Catholic denunciation of public education.³⁷

Perhaps some of the more perceptive Catholic churchmen realized that nonsectarian public schools were just a prelude to the eventual secularization of the whole system. But, in fact, persistent Catholic complaints about the Protestant nature of public education no doubt played an important role in this secularization process. Having adopted a siege mentality in a period of excessive anti-Catholicism, however unconscious it might have been, the Catholic leadership saw as its duty to defend their flock against all external aggression wherever it appeared. Therefore, if the public educators' nonsectarian compromise "set in motion a process which has resulted in the legal secularization of most public school education,"³⁸ then the logic of the position of the Catholic bishops necessarily made them unwitting allies in this secularization process.

³⁶ "Proceedings of the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore (1866)," quoted in *ibid.*, p. 184.

³⁷ A. D. Mayo, "Object Lessons in Moral Instruction in the Common School," *Proceedings of the National Educational Association* (1880), pp. 6-17.

³⁸ McCluskey, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

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Catholics were generally unsuccessful in their efforts to have their children excused from public school Bible reading and from participation in other religious exercises of Protestant identification. They were thought to be against the Bible and they met opposition at every step of the way. Kenrick had little success in Philadelphia just as Hughes had been defeated in New York. These bishops as well as other churchmen attempted in the 1840's to establish a *modus vivendi* with the public schools. But the social and religious climate of the day made this venture difficult to accomplish; and most of the immigrant bishops refused to compromise with the prevailing culture of the land. Positions began to harden and it appeared that there would be no retreat on either side. The majority insisted, whether consciously or not, on Protestant public schools while the Catholic minority characterized these institutions as dens of sectarianism and later of Godlessness intent on corrupting the faith and morals of their young flocks.

By the 1850's, it seems, the Catholic leadership gave up the fight. The battle appeared hopeless, and many bishops began to abandon public education and made strenuous efforts to establish their own separate diocesan parochial school systems. Determined but unsuccessful attempts to obtain public funds for these schools made it clear that they would have to be privately financed by Catholics themselves. By this time, Hughes was decreeing that schools should be built before churches and a fateful theme began to be impressed upon the American Catholic mind: every Catholic child in a Catholic school.³⁹ Urged on by bishops of Irish extraction, native bishops were slowly converted to the parochial school idea. Although the bishops realized that many Catholic children would continue to attend public schools, they had taken, nevertheless, the crucial step "in defining the Church's participation in formal education." This predominantly Irish immigrant pattern, at least in the pre-Civil War period, became generally accepted as the Catholic educational solution in the United States.

There were, however, some critics of this Catholic identifica-

³⁹ Kehoe, *op. cit.*, II, 715. My interpretation differs somewhat from that offered by Rev. Thomas McAvoy. While Father McAvoy stressed the German influence in the development of the parochial school movement, my contention is that the German influence became an important consideration only after the Civil War.

tion with European ethnicity. In particular did Orestes Brownson, the religious wanderer who embraced Catholicism after a long spiritual pilgrimage, argue that Catholics had to shed their foreign cultural patterns before they could "cease to be in this country an isolated foreign colony, or a band of emigrants encamped for the night, and ready to strike their tents, and take up their line of march on the morrow for some other place." He realized the close relationship of education in the process of the cultural assimilation of Catholics into American society. But Brownson was perceptive enough to realize that the parochial school die had been cast even though he thought that the bishops had given up too soon on public education. Wisely or not, the course was set in motion and had "gone too far to be arrested, even if it were desirable to arrest it. Our bishops and clergy have decided that the movement shall go on, and the Catholic cause can never be promoted by any anti-hierarchical action." But if Catholic schools were to fulfill their function, then they would have to be vastly improved in their outlook, modes, and curricula. They would have to become institutions that would socialize Catholic youngsters into their contemporary society — its ideas and ideals, its "intelligence and tendencies" — as well as become less European and more American in spirit.⁴⁰

But Brownson's voice was not heeded. After all, he was a Yankee, a convert with some strange ideas, and rather unfriendly to his Irish coreligionists. His insights as a native American and Catholic convert were shrewd but they never penetrated the immigrant mind. Of course, the high incidence of anti-Catholic activity during the two decades preceding the Civil War helped to blunt and blur the force of his argument. Brownson or not, the bishops had spoken and the priests and laity dutifully obeyed as faithful followers. Although impractical from the start, the parochial school ideal influenced most Catholic educational thought and activity during the rest of the nineteenth century and well into the first half of the twentieth century.

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Catholic immigrants came to the United States to start a new life and immediately found themselves victims of ethnic and reli-

⁴⁰ Orestes Brownson, "Catholic Schools and Education," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* (January, 1862), pp. 66-84.

gious prejudice. When they looked to the schools, they found them to be part of a structured society that was unsympathetic to their needs. Although race was not the issue at this time, their ethnic identity and religious loyalty seemed threatened in schools which mirrored the Protestant milieu of the country.

Protestants never hesitated to state their position in clear and cogent language. America was a Protestant country; Protestantism was essential for its continued welfare; therefore, the public institutions of the country should reflect this religious heritage in word and deed. Since the public schools prepared children for their moral, social and civic responsibilities, they were in a unique position to explain and inculcate those religious and political principles that gave birth and continued sustenance to this Christian, that is, Protestant nation. Not that the schools should include sectarian creeds in their instruction. But the Bible, a religious and patriotic symbol of the highest order, included those moral and spiritual lessons that were necessary to function well in a Protestant and republican country. Since all Christians believed in the Bible in one way or another, it was important that the future citizens of this country come to understand and respect its message. The Bible was the word of God and needed no annotated additions to explain its meaning. The common version was not sectarian since it contained the essence of the Christian faith. Catholics opposed it because they wanted its total exclusion from the schools. And because the Bible was the symbol of Protestant identification with Americanism, Catholic complaints amounted to an un-American stance perpetuated by immigrant hordes who were subjects of a foreign ecclesiastical power. Therefore, Catholics were guilty of a kind of religious and political treason since Bible reading was viewed not only as a religious act but also as a patriotic duty.

Catholics responded to this situation in a somber and obviously hypersensitive manner. They felt themselves suffocated in a hostile society and gradually developed a religious and cultural separatism to go along with their physical ghettos in the slum wards of the cities. Constant rejection of their demands caused a growing intransigence on their part and a caustic suspicion, sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious, of the society with all of its perils and humiliations. When the schools appeared to them to be as intractable as the rest of society, Catholics scorned them in the same way. Thus the gradual development of a system of parochial

schools that would protect the religiosity and ethnicity of Catholic children and reinforce the positive self-identity of church and home. Catholic cries of Godless and secularistic public education only hastened the development of their own schools. True, not all Catholic children would be able to attend these schools; but this was not due to policy or choice but rather to the problems of insufficient facilities and inadequate personnel. As a result, the hope of every Catholic child in a Catholic school emerged more as a vision than as a fact.

But Catholics had the vision and it set the tone for their educational endeavors during the rest of the nineteenth century right on into the twentieth century. Questions remained about the most effective implementation of the vision but the majority never challenged the soundness of the vision. Only in recent years have a growing number of Catholic educators begun to question the vision, the very dynamic for the existence of a system of parochial schools in contemporary America. America is no longer an immigrant society and the Catholic Church is no longer an immigrant church. The alien society is gone and the Catholic siege mentality has been lifted. What need, then, for the continued support of a separate system of Catholic education in America? What is the new rationale, if there be one, for Catholic education in the future? Unless *Catholic Education Faces Its Future* honestly and critically, it will have sounded its death knell and quietly and harmlessly faded away like the old but no longer useful soldier.⁴¹

⁴¹ Neil McCluskey, *Catholic Education Faces Its Future* (Garden City, 1969).